

1. *Is it possible for you to identify the start of the creative process, i.e. when a new work stirs in your mind? What factors influence the compositional impulse?*

I believe that when Ira Gershwin was asked "What comes first, Mr Gershwin? The words or the music?" he replied: "The contract!" I imagine that that motivates a lot of composers, including me. And, as part of the contract, the deadline. But there are many other factors: an abstract musical idea, for example, or even a phrase, that begs to be realised in some way and which leads to a whole piece. My *For Marimba & Tape* began life as a technical exercise on a Fairlight CMI: I was trying to discover how the portamento function in its Music Composition Language worked, finding, at the end, that I'd created something promising. I tacked on an extension, then another bit, and another, till after eighteen months or so a piece had emerged. A programmatic idea led to my choral piece *Who Killed Cock Robin?*: what really killed the bird? Perhaps the real culprit was not the sparrow but something far more sinister: DDT. Musical modelling of DNA sequences led to various pieces, as did ideas gained from Lewis Carroll's penchant for playing music boxes backwards and upside-down. The plight of the people of East Timor during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) moved me to try to express my solidarity through music, text and, usually, image, leading to more than a dozen pieces. Ditto the plight of the indigenous people of West Papua (e.g. *Papua Merdeka, Morning Star Lament*). Reading a newspaper article by Julian Burnside inspired me to create my audio-visual *Weapons of Mass Distortion*. In other words, there are many influences. Some take root and thrive while others wither on the vine – I mean, on the wesley-smith.

Once a piece is under way, I'm usually trying to move, fascinate, intrigue, involve, in a broad sense entertain, an idealised listener: me. If it works for me then there's at least a chance it will work for others too.

2. *There is a long-established tradition of composers being also performers (especially keyboard players) which goes back to the high Baroque period. How important is it nowadays for composers to be performers?*

There are many kinds of music these days, many kinds of composers, and many disparate influences. While a composer in the classical tradition can learn a lot from being a performer, she might find it more useful to have playing experience of several instruments – not necessarily at the highest level - rather than just one. Wide practical knowledge and experience can be grist for her musical mill. But if she's into algorithmic composition, say, or doing live coding, being a conventional performer might have limited, even negative, value. Negative? We are all products of our background, language, education, personality, life experience, and so on, and many years of studying and playing classical music might give one a conservative musical bent that makes it difficult to break through into new musical thinking. And might limit the acquisition of other relevant skills. But there are no hard and fast rules here: what is good for one particular goose might be less good for another, and there will be many exceptions to any rule one might formulate.

I'm not a performer of great skill (I hated practising when I was a kid), but I have played with symphony orchestras on banjo (Eisler and Weill) and synthesizer (Stockhausen); played cello in pit orchestras; played classical guitar on record; played electric guitar, piano and banjo in a jazz/rock band; sung and played in a folk trio on television and in clubs; sung in various choirs and vocal groups; done live performances with electronics, tape loops etc; played Fairlight CMI in concerts and on record; and have conducted in various areas. Perhaps I would have benefitted from sustained study of one instrument – but I feel, rather, that my eclectic performance experience has been beneficial in various ways. Perhaps it has been responsible for my eclectic compositional output, although I suspect that eclecticism is my natural bent, expressing itself in both performance and composition. That and a limited attention span.

I also suspect that the things I did as a kid and callow youth instead of practising were also influences on my music. Play. Damming local creeks. Riding my bike. Tubby the Tuba. Trapping rabbits. Chopping off chooks' heads at Christmas time (the only time we got to eat chicken). Cricket. Sharkey's Kings of Dixieland. Girls. Parties. Experimenting with Dad's reel-to-reel Tandberg tape recorder. Standing outside Henk Badings' electronic music studio and listening in awe. Listening to Brubeck, Desmond, Parker et al but also to Stockhausen's *Kontakte* and *Stimmung* and Reich's *Come Out*. In other words, life. Life in conservative post-war Adelaide. Vietnam. Conscriptation. Demos. Philosophy. Humanism. Politics. Many of my fellow students at the Elder Conservatorium of Music had little or no interest in anything much beyond learning the next piece and performing the next concert – if they later became composers, their influences, and mine, were different, with one not necessarily better than the other.

The concept of a performer these days has extended to include experts in various software packages – Ableton Live, for example, which is both a performance and compositional tool. Being a performer here goes hand in hand with being a composer. In short: while there are some magnificent Australian composer-performers (e.g. Deane, Sitsky, Vine, Westlake), there are many ways to cook one's bacon.

3. Composers of the past were sometimes fine music critics, for example, Schumann, Berlioz and Debussy. Do you think that contemporary composers make the best music critics, and if so, why?

There have been fine (by reputation) composer-critics in more recent times e.g. Virgil Thompson, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Felix Werder. I'm sure there have been some feeble ones, too. Composers, having worked, probably struggled, at the musical coal-face, are generally in a better position than most to understand a piece of music and what its composer is trying to say. But not all composers are insightful or able to express themselves well in words. And in many instances they are in an impossible conflict of interest. So no, contemporary composers do not automatically make the best exponents of what is generally a pretty dim profession.

Since I've been a composer, musical criticism in newspapers has declined alarmingly in the number, quality and length of published reviews. It is heartening, however, that these days the internet is allowing far more people (amateurs, mostly) to air their views about concerts they've been to and pieces they've heard. A lot of it is pretty ho-hum, but some is excellent.

4. *To what extent do you feel that inspiration from, or dependence on, literary texts affects the ultimate artistic quality of a composition?*

Some texts have inspired profound music, others haven't. Some music transcends inane texts while some texts are complete in themselves and don't need being set to music. I prefer to work with new material (usually by my brother, Peter Wesley-Smith).

5. *What originally turned you towards electronic types of composition rather than more 'conventional' or 'traditional' methods?*

The first electronic music I heard was by Henk Badings, who was a composer-in-residence at the University of Adelaide while I was still at school. I was fascinated by the technical processes as well as by the musical possibilities, and was itching to get into it myself. I also thought that learning to create electronic music was part and parcel of the business of being a composer, like knowing the range of the violin or how many bassoonists it takes to change a light bulb. My chance came when Adelaide businessman Derek Jolly bought a Moog Mark III synthesizer and made it available to music students. For six months I struggled with it, even though I had expert help from Peter Tahourdin, but suddenly I was hooked. Electronic music became a major part of my musical world from then on. These days it's simply one part of a composer's palette. I haven't composed a purely electronic piece for years, but I've done a lot of pieces for performer(s) and tape/CD/computer. *Welcome to the Hotel Turismo*, for example, for cello and pre-composed electronic part. I would love to do more pieces for live electronics, like I did in the olden days, but they don't seem to sit well with my membership of the Kangaroo Valley Pastoral Company.

Many years ago I had a very dismal experience with a symphony orchestra. After that I vowed never again to write for performers but to do it all electronically. That didn't last, of course, for I was privileged to be able to work with some of the finest performers on the planet. I find that the combination of the precision and scope of electronic music and the freedom and exhilaration of live performance is a very satisfying medium, one I intend to explore still further.

Interviewer: David Bollard (questions in *italics*)

Interviewee: Martin Wesley-Smith

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